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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 005843

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2021

TAGS: PREL PGOV TU

SUBJECT: TURKISH REACTION TO FRENCH PRESIDENT CHIRAC'S ARMENIAN GENOCIDE COMMENTS

REF: A. ANKARA 5515

¶B. ANKARA 5562

¶C. YEREVAN 1371

Classified by Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Turkish reaction to French President Chirac's comments that Turkey needs to recognize the Armenian "genocide" has been strong. Both this and potential passage by the French Assembly of a bill making denial of the Armenian "genocide" a crime remain neuralgic issues here, with possible wide ramifications for Turkish domestic politics and the prospects for EU-driven reform. End Summary.

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Chirac's Comments are the Latest Controversy. . . .  
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¶2. (C) The French President's remarks on the Armenian "genocide" September 30 garnered swift Turkish government and public reaction. Using the word "genocide," Chirac reportedly said that Turkey ought to acknowledge the events to be able to join the European Union, noting that "every country becomes greater by recognizing its dramas and its mistakes." The Turkish MFA released a statement that "Turkey was deeply saddened" by Chirac's remarks, and noting that Chirac himself had called for historians to decide when France was confronted last year with genocide accusations stemming from its colonial period.

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. . . .but Certainly Not the Last  
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¶3. (C) This may be the most recent controversy, but will not be the last. France has a large Armenian community and presidential elections are next year, French embassy poloff Brice Roquefeuil pointed out to us. On October 12, the bill to make denial of the Armenian "genocide" a crime punishable by up to a EURO 5000 fine and/or one year in jail will be re-introduced in the French Assembly and will likely pass, according to Roquefeuil. (Note: The bill did not pass in May due to procedural maneuvering to keep it from coming to a vote. End Note.) Because the bill must also pass in the Senate and be approved by the President, he added, it will continue to be a major irritant to bilateral relations.

¶4. (C) A bipartisan Turkish delegation of ruling and opposition party parliamentarians traveled to Paris October 4 to lobby against passage of the bill. Mehmet Dulger, ruling party MP and head of parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, reportedly asserted that the expulsion of illegal Armenian immigrants from Turkey could be a possible repercussion.

(Comment: Many pursue suitcase trade here; some just stay. Such repercussions, especially with the current nationalist mood here, are not out of the question. End Comment.) He also cited potential damage to France's economic interests in Turkey, such as nuclear power plant and helicopter projects. Opposition party MP Sukru Elekdag said, "If the bill is passed, it will damage the interests not only of France, but also of Armenia."

¶5. (C) MFA Department Head Nevzat Uyanik told us October 6 that he also believes the bill will pass the French Assembly and eventually go to President Chirac for signature. He would not speculate on whether Chirac would approve the law, but added that the French President "did not positively contribute to the debate" through his remarks in Armenia.

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Influence on EU Accession Process  
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¶6. (C) Despite the neuralgic nature of the issue, Roquefeuil expressed hope that Turkey's EU accession process would temper official Turkish reaction. Echoing Chirac's comments, he said that good neighborly relations and recognition of the past are part of the EU creed. Turkey will eventually have to respond on the Armenia issue during the long EU negotiation process, Roquefeuil added, even though

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recognition of the "genocide" was not an official precondition for accession.

¶7. (U) A critical EU parliamentary report on Turkey last week called again on Turkey to acknowledge the events but dropped the clause that would have asked that it be made a precondition for accession. In a September 27 announcement, the MFA said the rejection of the article which asked that recognition of the so-called Armenian genocide be a precondition for membership was important and emphasized other positive aspects of the report.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) Turkish official and public reaction to French actions echoes similar reaction against the U.S. in the past when the issue has gained headlines, most often in relation to the Armenian "genocide" recognition bill in Congress. It continues to hit a nerve, especially as Turkey is engaged in a delicate diplomatic dance with Armenia, trying to set up governmental and historical commissions (reftels). With parliamentary elections due in November 2007, the government will seek to protect itself from attacks from nationalists -- the greater the pressure from similar actions by European governments or parliaments, the less chance the joint commissions project will move forward. They already face the barrier of 2007 elections in both Turkey and Armenia. The timing is exquisitely poor as regards both Turkey's domestic political situation and EU accession process.

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